



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

## Region 21

(Franklin, Johnson, Massac & Williamson Counties)





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## Region 21 Executive Summary

In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decision-makers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

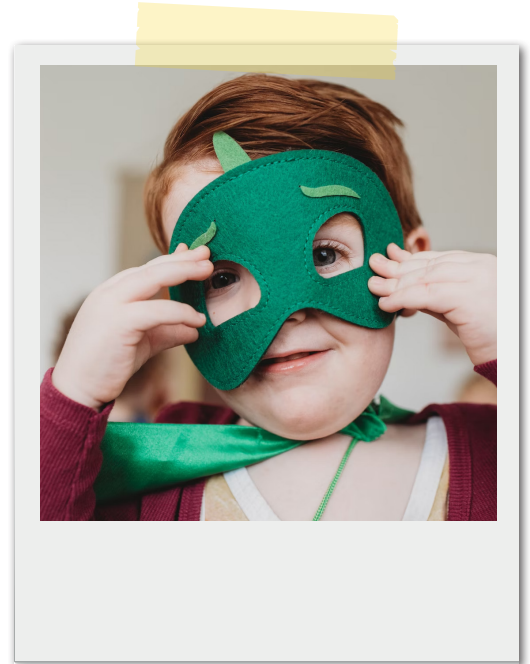
An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. Throughout the process, regional barriers were documented, and recommendations were developed based on identified needs of families. This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from the development of the Region 21 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

### Key Findings

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21 (Franklin, Johnson, Massac, and Williamson Counties) is beautifully located in the rural, scenic hills of deep southern Illinois, spanning 1,466 miles. The strength of the Region is its people and their willingness to work together, solving problems with innovative solutions. This forward-thinking collaboration is evidenced by the work of the Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC), one of the State's longest-standing Early Childhood Collaborations, providing leadership and support to the ECEC system in the Region to build strong communities, strengthen families, and promote children's success in school and in life.

Families living in poverty are the largest priority population in Region 21. According to Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) Fiscal Year 2020 data, 47% (4,236) of the children birth to age five in Region 21 are living in households with incomes at 200% the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or less. Although the number of children living at 100% FPL (defined as deep poverty) or less was reduced from 2017-2020, there are still 2,323 children living in poverty as of 2022, yielding 26% of families living at 100% FPL.

Families experiencing poverty require assistance to help meet their basic needs, which includes child care. There continues to be an underutilization of the State's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Both families



and local community stakeholders need to continue to be educated on CCAP and its accessibility to help deter the cost of child care.

Region 21 would also benefit from an increase in Birth to Three services, most severely in Johnson County where there are only enough slots to serve 12% of eligible children. Three out of four children in the Region do not have access to Birth to Three programs and/or services. As one parent said, “There are only 38 slots for children ages birth to three in my county. I cannot even fathom the fiscal and emotional stress of having to try and raise my child in Johnson County if family [child care support] was not an option.”

ECEC are seeing a shortage in the workforce across Region 21. When child care providers can hire new staff, they often lose them quickly to other jobs. Provider feedback indicates this is due in large part to finding better pay and benefits in other fields or positions. According to the Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities, in Fiscal Year 2021, the median annual wage in child care occupations in Region 21 was \$26,018.

## **Region 21 Needs**

1. Families need more information about the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) including family and provider eligibility.
2. Families need access to more Birth to Three services.
3. Early Childhood Educators need wages equal to other teaching counterparts along with benefits (health insurance, retirement, etc.) to help promote teacher recruitment and retention.
4. Working families need more access to full day state funded programs.
5. To make data informed decisions, the region leaders need accessibility to relevant/key data elements in a timely manner.

## **Region 21 Recommendations**

1. Increase utilization of the CCAP by increasing promotion and education for families.
2. Expand Birth to Three services in the entire Region. No county in the Region services more than 29% of its children.
3. Share information about the State’s current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.
4. The expansion of Pre-K services should include not only more slots but expand some part day programs to full day programs to meet the needs of families. These full day programs should be prioritized for working families.
5. In order to create an equitable system based on data, the state should prioritize its data collecting efforts, including what data elements are collected across programs and creating a centralized and accessible repository for all data collected.

For more information or to learn how you can become involved with Birth to Five Illinois, please contact:

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# REGION 21 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

Using a Collective Impact Model, between September 2022 and June 2023, we led our Action and Family Councils through data discussions to identify gaps and needs for children and families.

We coordinated focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather input from community members across the Region.



**8,982**

Children Under  
the Age of 6  
in Region 21



**4,236**

Children 0-5  
at 200% Federal  
Poverty Level



**4,746**

Children 0-5  
Without Publicly  
Funded ECEC Slots



Three out of four children do not have access to Birth to Three programs and/or services.

"There are only 38 slots for children ages birth to three in my county. I cannot even fathom the fiscal and emotional stress of having to try and raise a child in Johnson County if family was not an option."  
- Parent, Johnson County

**After identifying the most common and pressing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) needs of their communities, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.**

## **REGION 21 NEEDS**

1. Families need more information about the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), including family and provider eligibility.
2. Families need access to more Birth to Three services.
3. Early Childhood educators need competitive, livable wages along with benefits (health, retirement, paid time off, holiday pay).

## **REGION 21 RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Increase utilization of the CCAP by increasing promotion and education for families.
2. Expand Birth to Three services in the entire Region. No county in the Region services more than 29% of its children.
3. Share information about the State's current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers, and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.



**“Access to quality, affordable early learning opportunities is imperative for rural Southern Illinois. When parents can go to work, the local and state economies can thrive, and we are laying a foundation for child success.”**  
**- Business Leader, Williamson County**

# Overview & Acknowledgements



## Introduction

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment presents data on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from multiple state and local sources throughout Illinois. It is a collaborative data report that relies on the expertise of entities that collect and analyze ECEC data, Birth to Five Illinois staff, Birth to Five Illinois Action Council and Family Council members, and a variety of cross-sector stakeholders in all 39 Regions across the State.

Through these Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments, Birth to Five Illinois seeks to amplify the voices of those who have historically been minoritized, marginalized, or not invited to the decision-making table. Each Regional Needs Assessment offers parents, families, caregivers, ECEC providers, and other community stakeholders a platform for sharing valuable insights about their experiences within their local ECEC system. Additionally, it provides local, regional, and state decision-makers with qualitative information about each Region, adding critical context to the quantitative data that is available.

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

First, each Region's Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils will use it to identify gaps in data that is needed to best understand ECEC in their area. Birth to Five Illinois Council members and Regional Staff will also use this report as a basis for making recommendations on how to increase enrollment in, and access to, ECEC programs and services, as well as to determine what additional services/programs and resources may be needed to support families and caregivers throughout the Region.

Second, this report will be made available to parents and caregivers so they can have a fuller picture of what is happening in their community and Region. It is our hope that families will learn more about the available programs and services, share the resources with other caregivers with young children, become advocates for ECEC, and help to drive long-term, sustainable change in their communities.

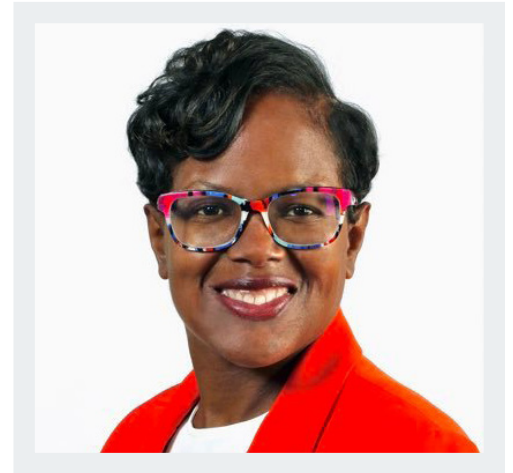
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand data related to ECEC indicators and direct funding to the under-resourced areas across the State based on the feedback received from ECEC system users.

Lastly, the report will be shared with local government bodies, early childhood providers, and organizations so they can use the findings to assess and demonstrate the need for services as funding opportunities become available. Additionally, the data can be used to identify where ECEC services may need to be expanded to support the caregivers and children in the Region.



## Letter from State Leadership

In under two years, I have had the privilege of partnering with the State's ECEC community to build Birth to Five Illinois, an extension of decades of foundational efforts that led to the creation of this statewide community system. In true collective impact modeling, we set out to design a system that respects and builds on the work of numerous local organizations that are working hard (often underfunded) to support children, families, and providers' access to our State's confusing and hard-to-navigate ECEC system.



While our work is not perfect, it is genuine and ever-evolving, and I am proud of the effort our Team has made to bring the vision of this equity-focused infrastructure to life. Birth to Five Illinois, while still in the development stage, has made great gains in bringing community members together under one goal, to make Illinois “the best state in the nation for families raising young children”. Our Team has gone above and beyond to make meaningful community partnerships and create space for the prioritization of family voices. My extended gratitude goes to each of the 128 people who shared the vision, brought their passion, and have worked tirelessly every day to improve ECEC experiences for the children and families in their communities.

In collective impact, nothing is done alone. We have many champions to thank, including:

- The Governor, staff in the Governor's Office and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), and the dedicated members of the Early Childhood Funding Commission for their early childhood visioning and dedication to racial equity.
- The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) for their generous funding and commitment to building this community system with families and caregivers at the center.
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) for providing the institutional, technical, and organizational support needed to launch the Birth to Five Illinois department and infrastructure.
- Illinois Action for Children (IACF) and the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) for training and technical support. Many of the visualizations in this report were developed by staff from both organizations based on data they collected and analyzed on our behalf.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the hundreds of community members who signed up to serve on their Region's Action and Family Councils. It is their perspective and passion that have inspired us and made this report possible. Thank you to the countless parents who trusted their Council peers with vulnerable stories; providers who emanate passion for the children in their care; business owners offering creative solutions for the identified needs; elected officials who are fierce advocates; faith leaders who opened their doors for care and are now encouraging others to do the same; and various ECEC systems partners who offer families step-by-step support through the enrollments process, blending together the supports families need.

These Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments are a compilation of community members' experiences; not ours. We thank them for sharing and hope we have represented them well.

**Cicely L. Fleming (she/her)**  
Director, Birth to Five Illinois

## Letter from Regional Leadership

Birth to Five Illinois has created a statewide regional infrastructure centered on authentic family and community engagement. As the initial part of this process, we completed our Region 21 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment by harnessing information directly from families, early childhood providers, and community members/business stakeholders. Our staff had direct interactions with people in the community via Action Council and Family Council meetings, community collaboration convenings, general conversations, focus groups, interviews, and surveys. It is our goal to provide leaders with specific qualitative data with the hope that State funding priorities will align with regional needs.

We express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has participated in this important work. The primary goal of the Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC) is to develop a strong and effective infrastructure that promotes positive outcomes for children and families in southern Illinois. This group has provided leadership and support in this Region to collaborate efforts and resources. We thank them for laying a solid foundation for this work and for being team players in this process.

Our Team extends a heartfelt thank you to our Action and Family Council members for the hours of work they invested in this process. Council members worked in both their personal and professional lives to connect others in their community to the work of Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21, and for that we are grateful. They have analyzed data, shared stories, expanded early childhood conversations and engagement to new tables and stakeholders, engaged in discussions, and provided valuable input to assist in our efforts to paint a robust picture of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape in Region 21. Also, we would like to thank those who participated in focus groups, interviews, and surveys. We would like to recognize the invaluable input from conversations held with community members at various events and in general conversations. Families who are utilizing ECEC services in our Region know the system better than anyone. Our thanks go out to them for their vulnerability in sharing their experiences. Their knowledge and expertise played a vital role in the preparation and completion of this report. We are extremely grateful to our local communities and business stakeholders as they have embraced Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21 and the important work we are doing.

This work is a first step in gathering information, deepening knowledge, building a commitment to work together, and providing input from families and communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the state of Illinois. These dedicated individuals are committed to helping us achieve this mission by sharing their firsthand experiences, precious time, and learned knowledge so we can work together to better meet the needs of children and families in Region 21.

Thank you,

**Tonya Frehner (she/her)**

Regional Council Manager: Region 21

Birth to Five Illinois



## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois

ECEC in Illinois is made up of several programs, including publicly funded programs such as Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, home visiting, preschool, and center- and home-based child care. ECEC also exists within a larger system of services and supports for families, including pediatric health care, mental and behavioral health care, child welfare, and family-focused economic supports. When available, these services and supports can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

While programs and services for families and children exist across the state of Illinois, they are not accessed equitably. For example, families in rural areas oftentimes live in child care deserts and are forced to travel long distances to place their child in any program, regardless of its quality. Another example is families who speak a language other than English who may live in an area without programming in their home language, making it difficult to find educational options. A family that has little to no access to economic or material resources may live in a city with many programs but be unable to enroll their children due to the excessive cost of tuition and long waitlists for access to publicly funded slots.

Additionally, funding for ECEC has been siloed across multiple state agencies and has lacked a cohesive process for distributing funds to providers. Decentralized funding has led to unintended equity issues, leaving some areas of the State with nominal public funding for ECEC programming and others without enough funding to meet the demands of communities.



In 2019, Governor JB Pritzker declared, “Illinois will become the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and child care. My promise is this: our work won’t be complete until every child in this state enters kindergarten with the cognitive skills to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems, but also the social-emotional skills to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, self-regulate, display kindness and cope with challenges.”

To honor this commitment, the Governor’s Office formed the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding to study and make recommendations on funding that would provide more equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children ages birth to five. Work groups met throughout 2020 and published a report of findings and recommendations in March 2021.

The Commission made the following recommendations to address the racial, geographic, and economic inequities found in Illinois’ ECEC system:

1. Increase public investment to help better subsidize the cost families pay out of pocket.
2. Create a coordinated funding approach by centralizing state and federal funding and distribute funding in new, more targeted ways.
3. Provide a single source for information and funding for ECEC with designated regional structures to make the system easier for families and providers.

Following these recommendations, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) established the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) to help centralize and streamline the State’s existing child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention programs.

Additionally, after the Commission report recognized, “community input and data can fuel distribution of funds more effectively and equitably” and urged for the creation of a community and regional infrastructure to ensure input from families and providers is included in the state level decision-making process, the State partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch our equity-focused regional system. Named Birth to Five Illinois, the goal of this new infrastructure is to create a network of community Councils across the State tasked with identifying the service needs in each region.

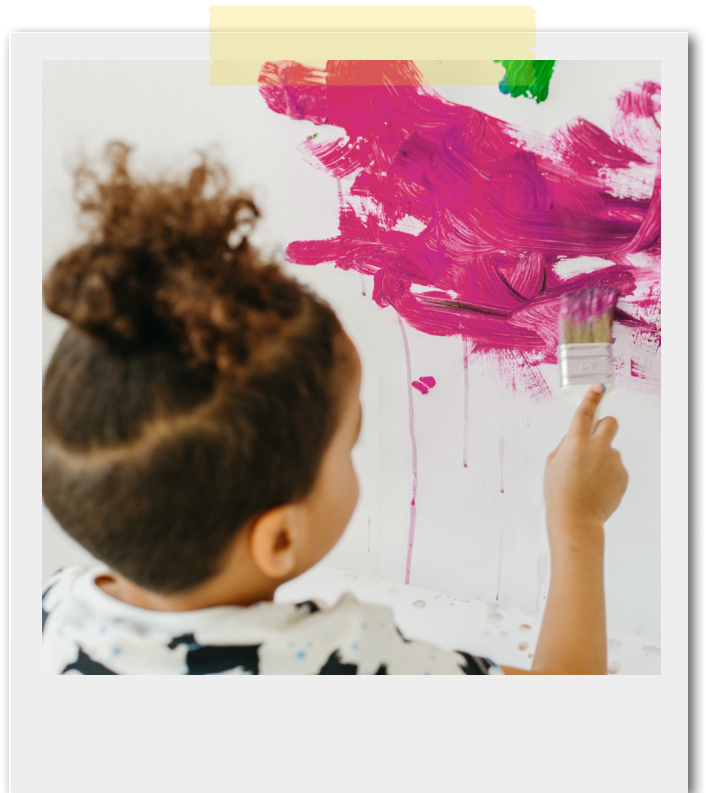
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the state of Illinois.

Our **vision** is reimagining a more equitable ECEC system that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at every level of decision-making in Illinois.

Our **values and goals** are:

- **Family Voice:** Through this transformation centered on authentic family and community engagement, we will address the inequitable distribution of resources and services and rebuild our State’s ECEC system.
- **Racial Equity:** In an effort to move our ECEC system to one where racism no longer impacts a child’s success, we will work to dismantle barriers that have limited access to high-quality services for minoritized children in every corner of our State.
- **Collective Impact:** Birth to Five Illinois will build a system that harnesses knowledge directly from families and providers and encourages decision-makers to ensure new and/or expanded services are created to meet community needs. This community-driven framework will directly influence policy/funding at the local, regional, and state level.

Staying true to our mission and vision, Birth to Five Illinois has standardized the use of pronouns to affirm all genders and has included a land acknowledgement in each Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments to honor the Indigenous Peoples who were forcibly removed from their land.

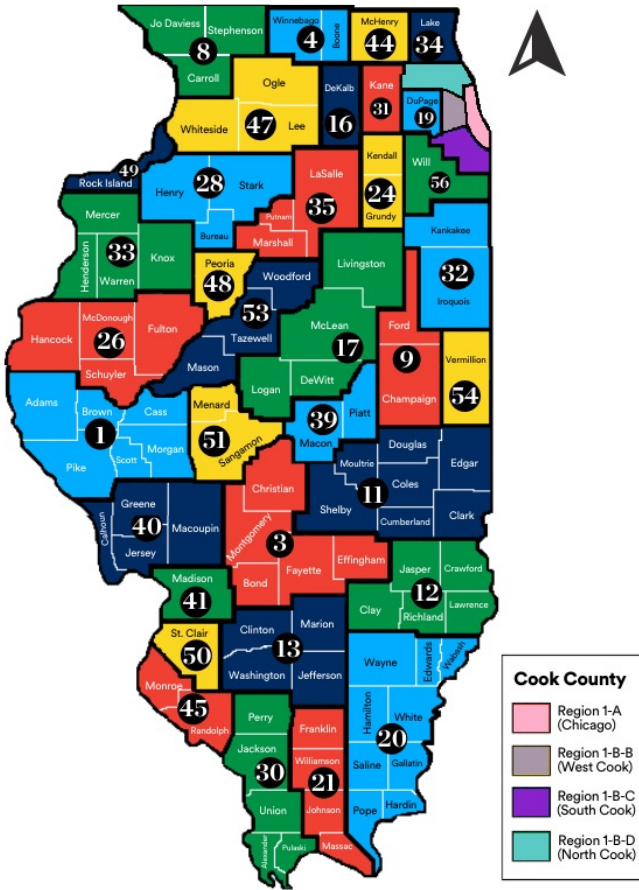


# Timeline

- **March 2021**  
Early Childhood Commission Report Published
- **September 2021**  
Birth to Five Illinois Director, Cicely Fleming, Hired
- **February 2022**  
Official Public Launch of Birth to Five Illinois
- **March 2022**  
Held Regional Community Engagement Live Webinars
- **April 2022**  
Established Partnerships with Existing Regional Early Childhood Collaborations
- **May – July 2022**  
Hired 39 Regional Council Managers across the State
- **August – November 2022**  
Hired Additional 78 Regional Support Staff
- **September 2022**  
Awarded \$2.6 Million to 24 Implementation Grantees
- **October – November 2022**  
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Action Councils
- **December 2022**  
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Family Councils
- **January 2023**  
Awarded \$575,000 to 9 Planning Grantees
- **January – April 2023**  
Council Meetings & Ongoing Community Engagement (Focus Groups & Interviews)
- **June 2023**  
39 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments Released
- **July – August 2023**  
Report Dissemination & Public Input



# Birth to Five Illinois Regions



To provide a structure for communities, families, and caregivers to engage with the data and share their experiences, our new statewide infrastructure was created across 39 Regions. The Regions align with existing Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Regional Offices of Education (ROE) boundaries. To better match demographic data to the needs for ECEC programs, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), along with the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), provided maps that reflect the true boundaries of the Birth to Five Illinois Regions. Birth to Five Illinois regional boundaries align with school districts instead of strictly following county lines, which can be a challenge for gathering and interpreting data because many early childhood services are provided by, or tied to, school districts.

After the Regions were established and staffed, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils were created by Regional Selection Committees. To ensure diverse perspectives, outreach efforts focused on community members who might be new to this type of work. Action Councils are comprised of ECEC professionals, healthcare providers, faith leaders, elected officials, and other community members. Each Action Council reserved two seats for parents/caregivers to ensure

family voices were included in every discussion. Family Councils are comprised of parents/caregivers from a wide variety of family types: single parents, adoptive and foster parents, caregivers of relatives, underage parents, two parent families, multi-generational families, and more. Each Regional Selection Committee reviewed Interest Forms, and recommendations were made based on a full consideration of a submitter's role/sector, location within the Region, race/ethnicity, gender, and answers to open-ended questions.

## Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

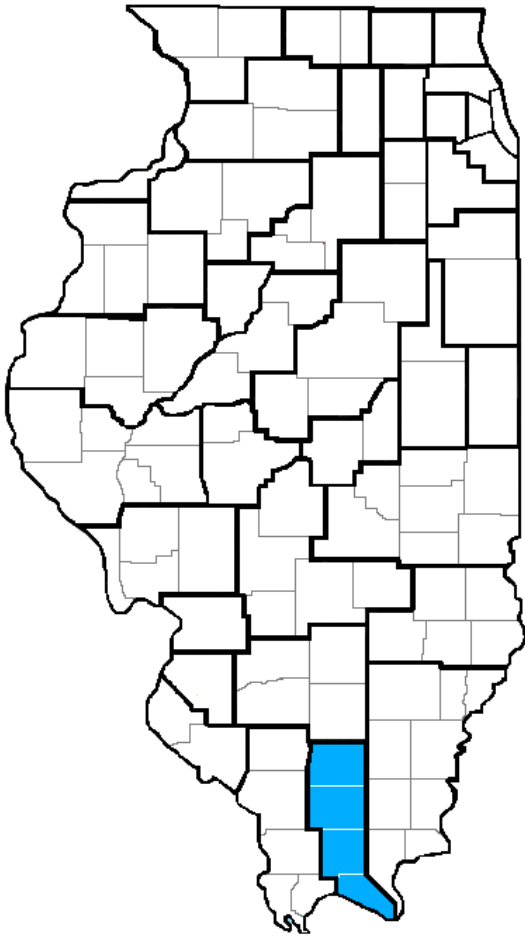
Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise noted. Some Regions included additional data collected during Community Based Planning or from state and/or local organizations and agencies. Action Council members were invited to bring additional aggregated data on programs and services provided by their agency/organization to complement IECAM data, while Family Council members brought their stories and experiences with the ECEC system to help contextualize quantitative data presented and discussed during meetings.

Additional qualitative data was collected community-wide through focus groups and interviews, and all Council members were invited to provide input on their Region's report. Council members developed the strengths, needs, and recommended next steps that are unique to each Region. Regional Teams, along with the support of their Action and Family Council members, created a dissemination plan and are holding community meetings virtually and in-person to share their report's findings. Throughout the fall of 2023, Regional Teams will lead their Councils through implementation planning based on the recommendations made in their report.

# Spotlight on Region 21



# Regional Community Landscape



## Regional Boundaries

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21 (Franklin, Johnson, Massac, and Williamson Counties) is beautifully located in the rural, scenic hills of deep southern Illinois, spanning 1,466 square miles. It runs from the Ohio River on the western Kentucky border up to Sesser and Ewing, Illinois in the far north part of Franklin County, encompassing the Shawnee National Forest. The largest county is Williamson, housing 51% of the Region’s population and 59% of the Region’s employers. The largest city is Marion, also located in Williamson County. There are 16 towns, 27 villages, 22 public school districts, three private schools, and two special education cooperatives. As of 2020, the average household income was \$50,598.75.

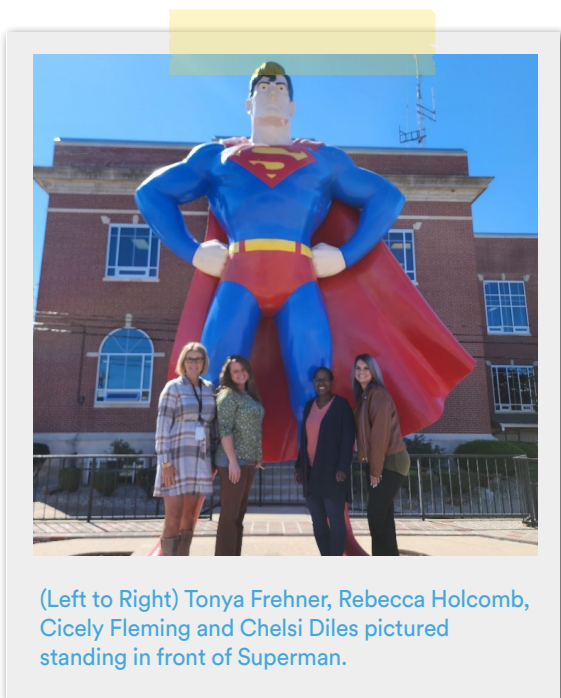
Region 21 is home to John A Logan Community College, Southern Illinois Healthcare, Aisin Manufacturing, Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company, four state and federal prisons, and a coal impact Region where agriculture is a mainstay. Our Region closely borders Southern Illinois University and Shawnee Community College. In addition, state government offices, fast-food restaurants, and agriculture make up large industries. We are also home to Superman; Metropolis is a fictional city appearing in American comic books published by DC Comics, best known as the home of Superman and his closest allies and some of his foes.

The Region borders are very close to Kentucky and Missouri, making it a short driving distance to cross over to purchase groceries, gas, and other necessities at lower tax rates, which results in a loss of the local tax base. This Region is full of many small towns. There is a strong sense of community, evidenced by the many local festivals, events, and churches. The Region is easily accessible via Amtrack and Interstate, which is helpful for tourist attractions. The area is known for sporting events, multiple wineries, wine trails, hunting/fishing, hiking, and for a slower-paced lifestyle.

## Land Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21 (Franklin, Johnson, Massac, and Williamson Counties) acknowledges that this Region is the traditional homeland of ḲḶḶḶḶ ḲḶḶḶ ḲḶḶḶ ḲḶḶḶḶ (Osage), Ogaxpa, Myaamia (Miami), Kaskaskia, Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux) Nations. We acknowledge all the Native Peoples who came before us and continue to live here.

<sup>1</sup> Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>



(Left to Right) Tonya Frehner, Rebecca Holcomb, Cicely Fleming and Chelsi Diles pictured standing in front of Superman.

## Regional Demographics

According to the Census, the population of Region 21 is 132,307; 9,049 (7%) of those people are children under the age of 6. Ninety-two percent of the entire population is white. This data shows that 29% of the 0-5 population is representative of minoritized populations. The largest of those (348) are children identified of two or more races.<sup>2</sup> In addition to racial inequity, geographic inequity is a reality in this rural Region that needs to be addressed. Most children are concentrated in a few towns across the Region (see Appendix B). Those who live in one of the 27 rural villages or unincorporated areas have limited access to resources and are forced to commute to one of the larger towns to find child care programs and services.

“ We have families leave the community because they can go 15-20 minutes away to an area with more resources. - Community Member (Massac County) ”

Williamson is the largest county; 52% of the children under the age of six reside there. The age breakdown of children under the age of six is even, with 4,290 children 0-2 and 4,692 children 3-5 years old. Analyzing and comparing data from 2017-2020 demonstrates a reduction in the 0-2 population. Possible reasons could be the reduction in birth rate (per the Illinois Department of Public Health); provider feedback in Massac County reported families with young children having to move from the Region (due to limited resources) to areas where resources were more plentiful.

## Children & Families from Priority Populations

To advance equity in access, the Illinois Early Learning Council has identified individuals who should be prioritized by ECEC providers and funders<sup>3</sup>. In Region 21, the largest priority population is children living in poverty. Living in conditions that create poverty can affect all areas of a child’s life, such as food security, housing stability, and overall health and development. The Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) reports that 47% (4,236) of children ages birth-to-five are living in households with incomes at 200% poverty or less. Fifty five percent of these children (2,348) live in households with incomes at or below the 100% Federal Poverty Line (FPL).<sup>4</sup>

The income threshold for 100% FPL for a family of four is \$26,200 per year.<sup>5</sup> The percentages per county are similar in three of the counties in Region 21. In Johnson County, the percentage of children birth to age five whose household income is at the poverty level or less is 26%, followed by Williamson County at 27% and Franklin County at 28%. Children in Massac County fare much better with only 13% of the children living in households with this low-income level. When comparing this information to previous years, it shows that the number of families with income at the lowest level is decreasing slightly. While this is good news, there are still too many young children whose families are struggling to make ends meet, hindering opportunities for child and family success.

Figure 1: 2020 Federal Poverty Levels

# of Persons in Household	2020 Federal Poverty Level (Annual Income)	
	100%	200%
1	\$12,760	\$25,520
2	\$17,240	\$34,480
3	\$21,720	\$43,440
4	\$26,200	\$52,400
5	\$30,680	\$61,360
6	\$35,160	\$70,320
7	\$39,640	\$79,280
8	\$44,120	\$88,240

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/US>

<sup>3</sup> <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>

<sup>5</sup> 2020 Poverty Level Annual Income as defined by the United States Department of Health and Human Services can be found at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/2021-poverty-guidelines>

Other priority populations identified by Council members that need to be considered include, and are not limited to, single-income households, families with child welfare cases, foster parents/guardians, families that include children or parent/guardians with disabilities, families experiencing homelessness, and underage parents. Another priority population identified by Council and community members is grandparents raising children that are not biologically their own. Community feedback attributes these circumstances in large part to addiction, mental health, and stress. An often-over-looked population in our Region are the families that work and make just enough money to fall above the eligibility income requirements for assistance. This group has often been referred to as the “working poor”.

Figure 2 shows the average cost of child care per child per year in our Region. A family of four would pay on average \$23,000 for care for two children.<sup>6</sup> With the impact of inflation in this current economy on the cost of living, grocery costs, and gas prices, these families are desperately struggling to make ends meet. The rising cost of utilities is causing financial strain on all families. Situations like this can lead to mental health struggles, such as depression and higher stress levels, that impact family dynamics. Below is another example from a family in the Region.

“Poverty is difficult to understand until it happens to you. I am a single mom of five children. I have had to decide whether to pay the electric bill to keep my children warm or go to the grocery store to keep my children fed. My energy is spread thin trying to make ends meet, and I know the stress falls over onto my children.”

- Parent (Johnson County)

**Figure 2: Average Center-Based Care in Region 21**

Type of Care	Cost Per Year/Child
Infant Care (Ages Birth-Two)	\$13,195
Preschool Care (Ages Three- Four)	\$9,750

\* Child Care Resource and Referral (Carterville)

“In 2020, three days after the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown began, our youngest daughter was born. We quickly learned our daughter had a congenital heart disease that would require heart surgery within her first year of life. One month later, my husband was laid off from his job. This meant moving our family during the pandemic so my husband could find work and so we would be closer to the hospital that would care for our daughter’s needs. During this time, we began to undergo financial stress. We made just enough income to not receive state support or benefits while not making enough to live comfortably. This was a challenge for us as we weren’t sure how we were going to make it through this difficult time. The cost of gas for traveling to St. Louis Children’s Hospital, groceries for our family of five, hospital bills, mortgage, utility bills, etc. made it difficult to survive without having any financial assistance.”

- Family Council Member (Johnson County)

To truly understand the needs of the Region, it is pertinent to understand who the families with young children are, where they live, what services they seek, the barriers to family success, and how many of these families are eligible for financial support. This information provides critical context for determining specific needs in the Region and determining the platform for where and how these programs can be delivered.

<sup>5</sup> Average Cost of Care in Region 21 from Child Care Resource and Referral (John A Logan College)

## Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations (LCC) are groups of individuals, community members, agencies, organizations, and businesses who come together to share Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) resources and information to fulfill a shared vision or goal. LCCs are important, as they allow groups to streamline resource allocation and align around outcomes for children; together, the collective impact is much more powerful. In Region 21, our LCC offers an umbrella of support for the entire Region, providing the foundation other youth (or ECEC) service agencies need to delve into the work at the local community level.

The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families, which serves the southern fifteen counties of the State, is Region 21's only formal community system Collaboration. The Coalition's mission is to provide leadership and support that builds strong communities, strengthens families, and promotes children's success in school and life. The Coalition has five strategic priorities, identified through comprehensive stakeholder input: school readiness, screening, workforce, strong families, and acting as an impact accelerator for Local Collaborations and other initiatives that engage community members in championing the issues important to their mission. Current Coalition strategic priorities include developmental and social-emotional screening, the Early Childhood workforce, strong families, communication, and building caring and engaged communities, acting as an impact accelerator for aligned systems work, such as Birth to Five Illinois and the Johnson County Cabinet for Children and Youth.<sup>7</sup>



Johnson County Cabinet for Children and Youth group photo at initial cabinet meeting.

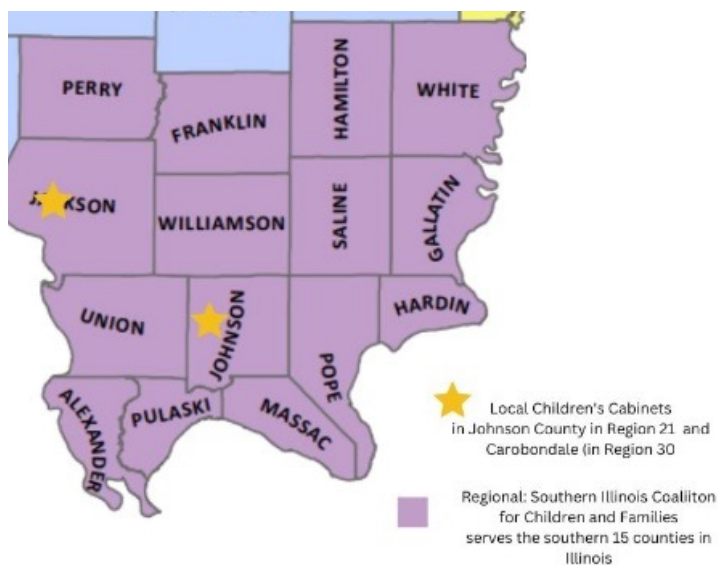
Recognizing that some work is more effective when implemented at local levels, the Coalition worked in partnership with Resilient Southern Illinois and Harvard University to launch this new Children's Cabinet in the fall of 2022. As an emerging Collaboration, the Johnson County Cabinet for Children and Youth (JCCCY) will work in partnership with the Coalition to address needs specific to Johnson County. JCCCY is a community-wide collective impact emerging Collaboration to help children and their families reach their fullest potential. JCCCY has a mission to ensure all children and youth, from cradle to career, living in Johnson County will have access to the programs and services they and their families seek to grow and thrive. Two committees were formed to facilitate the work: one focused on ECEC and one dedicated to K-12

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.southernillinoiscoalition.org/about-us.html>

impact and support. These two committees have three strategic priorities that govern the projects and activities of the Collaboration: to promote equity for all children, youth, and families; address systemic issues and provide practical interventions across all sectors; and provide broad community engagement for all impact. Currently, the ECEC Subcommittee has several ongoing projects to help meet this need, including strategic planning and asset mapping, addressing the Harvard: By All Means Community of Practice, and piloting an early literacy project for kids and their families.

This tiered approach to systems work is efficient in terms of resource allocation, avoiding duplication of effort, and alignment of missions. It is important to include this information in this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment to highlight how Region 21 can be more effective in our collaborative efforts.

**Figure 3: Collaborations in Region 21**



Source: Partner Plan Act  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

There are many types of ECEC programs in Region 21. These include licensed and licensed-exempt Child Care (including the Child Care Assistance Program), Preschool for All (PFA), Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Early Head Start, Home Visiting, Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education.

### Child Care & Family Child Care

The Region is home to 20 licensed child care centers and 50 licensed family child care homes. These programs provide a safe place for children to be while their caregivers are working, and many also provide high-quality early learning opportunities. Of the licensed child care centers in Region 21, six centers (three Gold and two Silver) and three family child care homes (one Silver and three Bronze) have achieved an ExceleRate Illinois rating, documenting their efforts to go above and beyond what is required by Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) licensing in order to meet the developmental and educational needs of young children.<sup>8</sup>

Community, provider, and parent/family feedback indicates several strengths with the child care available in Region 21. Those include their care schedules and licensing regulations that promote safe care and require trained staff and specified teacher/student ratios, allowing for earlier detection of abuse and neglect and/or developmental delays. Challenges identified were: lack of available infant care; most programs are closed during major holidays; pickup and drop-off times can be rigid; kids get sick more often in group care; and licensed providers cannot provide care for sick children.

License-exempt Centers (also known as faith-based/private schools) are legally exempt from needing a child care license and from having to meet and follow the State's health and safety requirements to provide care. There are four in Region 21.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.excelerateillinoisproviders.com/>

“ I recently became a single mom, head of household, and the only wage earner. I must work to feed my children. I need reliable, affordable child care. When I recently chose care for my youngest child, I took a spot because it came available. I did not choose a center because of references, quality, a good review, transportation, cleanliness, etc. because I did not have that option. I desperately needed child care so that I could go to work.

- Parent (Williamson County)

License-exempt Family Child Care (also known as Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care) providers can care for up to three children or the same children from one family without being licensed. This type of care is a viable option for families in Region 21, especially for those working nontraditional hours and/or living in very small communities where more formalized options are not available. Currently, we have 143 families using this care (41 in Franklin, three in Johnson, 19 in Massac, and 80 in Williamson). Parental feedback indicated benefits of this care included: greater flexibility to meet non-traditional work hours; families of children with health or behavioral needs find it to be a better match; continuous care for multiple children that maintain existing bonds; and trust of the family member.

### Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) CCAP is a program that is available to help families pay for the increasing cost of child care. Eligibility is based on income and the parent being employed or engaged in an educational activity (high school, trade school undergraduate college). The income eligibility limit includes families with incomes below the 225% federal poverty level, which is \$13,590 for an individual and \$27,750 for a family of four. Assistance is tied to the family, and the family chooses the type of child care that most closely meets their needs.

According to the data, many families who may be eligible for CCAP do not participate in the program. Among the barriers cited are lack of information regarding how the program works and a lengthy and difficult application process. IDHS is working to address these barriers, and CCAP has implemented several policies to increase access to these funds. In addition, the application is being revised to become more user-friendly. These changes have helped lead to a 13% increase in usage of the CCAP system in the Region in the last six months.

“ We owe it to our children and their future to invest in child care. Child care is not only critical to our workforce and economy but to prepare our next generation for success in school and later in life.

- School Superintendent  
(Johnson County)

“ I have my three kids in daycare and CCAP has helped a working mother stay working.

- Parent (Williamson County)

### Preschool for All & Head Start

Illinois Preschool for All Program (PFA) is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The program focuses on providing high-quality educational programs for children ages three to four who live in households accessing low-to-moderate income and who are determined by ISBE to be “at risk of academic failure” due to factors in their home or community that limit their access to resources. There are 23 Preschool programs in Region 21 in every county in the Region and in almost every school district. All

but one of these programs is housed in school buildings; it is in a community-based organization (CBO). Parental feedback indicated several strengths for the PFA model. Some of those include: a consistent schedule; access to special needs services; no cost to families; smooth transition to Kindergarten; and qualified staff. Challenges included: half-day programs are difficult for working parents; transportation; lack of information about enrollment process; and not enough spots for children.

Head Start receives federal funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The program serves children three to five years of age. Eligibility is based primarily on income. Programs may enroll some children from families whose incomes are higher than the FPL if they meet other eligibility requirements. There are seven Head Start programs in Region 21, located closest to the areas where the poverty levels are highest. Participation in both PFA and Head Start is free to eligible families. Some strengths identified by parents and community members are free of cost, medical and dental services, and whole-family supports. Some challenges include those in Franklin and Williamson Counties cannot attend sites outside of where they live, transportation, and the stigma associated with qualifying for a low-income publicly funded program.



Chelsi Diles reading a book to a group of children.

## **Prevention Initiative, Early Head Start & Shawnee Healthy Families Home Visiting (Birth to Three Programs)**

The supply of state and federal programs serving children ages birth to three is extremely limited in Region 21. There are three types of government funded programs for children in this age group. They include ISBE's Prevention Initiative, federally funded Early Head Start, and the IDHS funded Healthy Families Home Visiting program.

Prevention Initiative Programs provide comprehensive child development and family support services for expectant persons and families with children from birth to age three who may be at risk for academic failure. There are six programs in the Region, and they are all located in Franklin County.

Early Head Start, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides similar services to that of Head Start but serves expectant persons and families with children ages birth to three. Eligibility is like Head Start, based on income, but other criteria such as housing status and foster care involvement can be considered for enrollment. There are four programs in the Region, one in every county.

A third type of program for children ages birth to three is Shawnee Healthy Families Home Visiting, funded by IDHS. They offer services in both Franklin and Williamson Counties. It is a voluntary parent education and support program that offers home visiting to eligible first-time parents (and some second time parents). Participation in all three of these publicly funded programs is free to those who qualify.

Caregivers who are using these services express a high level of satisfaction. The biggest challenge is they are not available to most families. There is a need for more Birth to Three services in all counties in Region 21, with the greatest need in Johnson County (enough slots to serve 12%, 38 slots for 318 children).

## Early Intervention (EI)

Early Intervention is a program funded by IDHS that provides services and supports to children ages birth to three with developmental delays and disabilities. Families with an eligible infant or toddler can receive these services. Per IECAM FY20 data, there are 114 children in Region 21 receiving EI services. Some strengths identified by parents and community members include: many services are provided in the homes; services are offered at no cost to families; the system is easy to access, as anyone can refer a child; and services can start at birth. Challenges in the Region include: waiting lists; lack of therapists to provide services; limited available transportation; and requirements are different for an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), two education support documents for children of different ages.

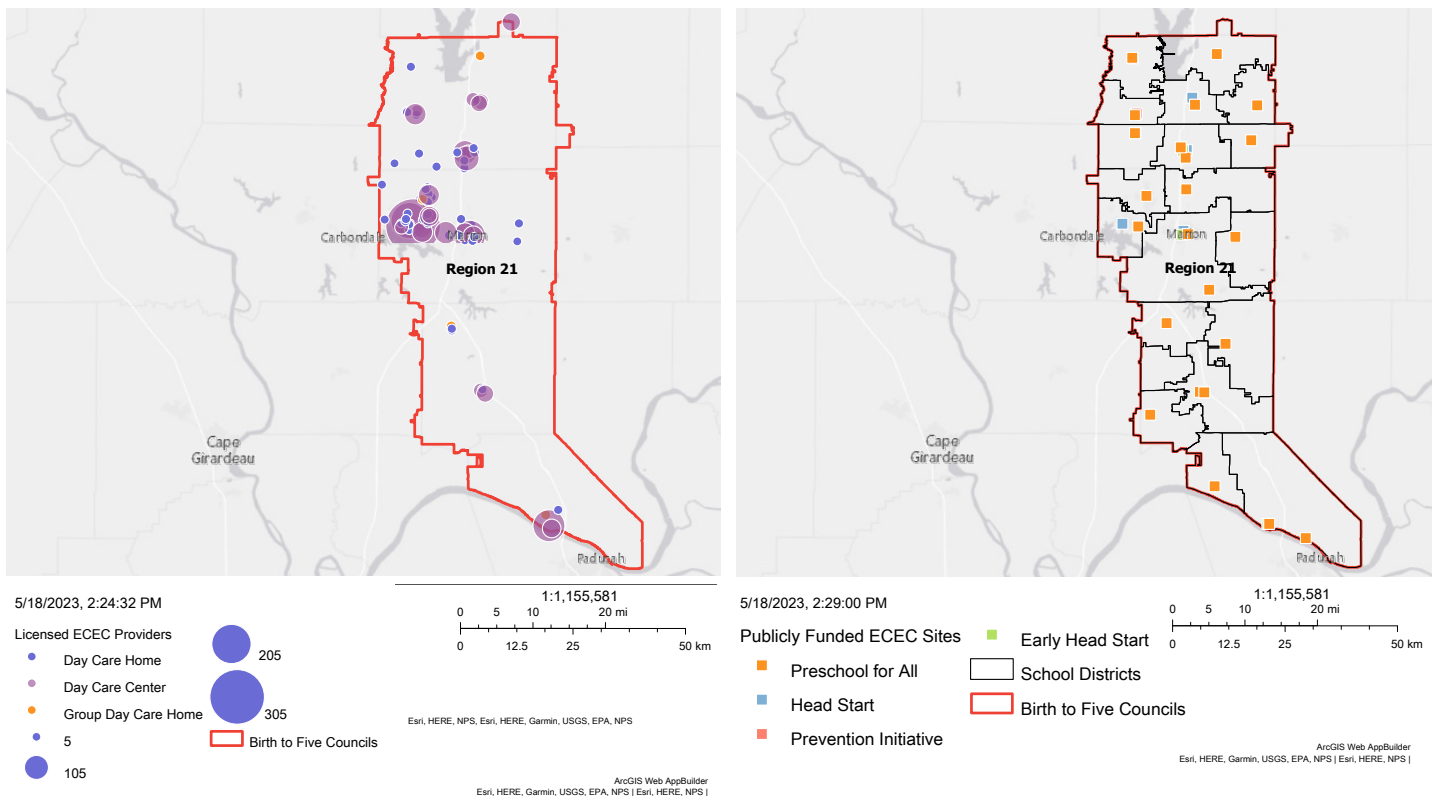
## Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

ECSE is funded by ISBE. It provides free, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a preschool child with a disability, three years of age until the age of eligibility for public school. Several strengths of the ECSE in our Region were identified, including: giving incentives to current instructors to receive certifications; offering a variety of services; connecting with the students; and IEP's help children reach milestones before starting Kindergarten. Challenges that were identified include: overwhelmed instructors; staffing shortage; capacity to reduce overall effectiveness; and IEP process and meetings can be overwhelming for families.

## Summary

When caregivers' options for child care arrangements are limited or inaccessible, it impacts their ability to participate in the workforce, either opting out entirely or limiting the hours they work. Parents/caregivers missing from the workforce have a direct impact on our economy. When children and families do not have the programs and services they need, it affects the entire community.

Figure 4: Region 21 Licensed ECEC Providers



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3



There is a need for Birth to Three services all around Region 21, most severely in Johnson County (enough slots to serve 12% of eligible children). The impacts of the lack of services for this population are compounding. When the needs of the children go unserved, they often become more severe over time, requiring more time and resources. Not only does this hinder a child's success upon entering school, but it also puts a strain on the school system and community to find the resources that were not available earlier in the child's life. In addition, not having access to services can take a toll on the caregiver's mental health, which can lead to increased trauma. Region 21 also has limited home visiting services; most resources are closer to larger cities and school districts, and resources are less available in more rural areas. Below is a quote from one family in our Region who was able to access Early Intervention services during the pandemic.

“ Access to quality, affordable early learning opportunities is imperative for rural Southern Illinois. When parents can go to work, the local and state economies can thrive, and we are laying a foundation for child success.

- Business Leader  
(Williamson County)

”

“ My greatest success with Early Childhood Education and Care services has been Early Intervention. Head Start and its resources have helped our son with where he needed to be, and beyond. The staff was amazing and helped us even through the pandemic by giving us materials so he wouldn't take a step backward and would keep going forward. I would like more Occupational Therapy services available outside of the school district for my son to receive his therapy from home or outside of school hours.

- Family Council Member (Franklin County)

”

# Slot Gap

Slot gap is a quantitative measure used to describe the difference between the total number of children under age six in the Region and the total number of children than can be served through its ECEC programs. Slot gap measures the unmet need for education and care in the Region; it does not account for families who choose not to enroll their children into an ECEC program.

According to IECAM, there are 8,982 children ages birth to five living in the Region. Of these, 4,236 children live in households with income levels at 200% of poverty or less (\$52,400 for a family of four), making them potentially eligible for enrollment in a publicly funded program. However, the program’s total capacity is 1,879 children, leaving a slot gap of 2,537 (60%). So, roughly 40% of the children who may be eligible for services actually have access to these programs.

**Figure 5: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

In terms of licensed child care, there are a total of 1,814 slots (1,270 in licensed centers and 544 in licensed homes). Looking at the Region’s ECEC system in its entirety, there are a total of 3,693 “slots” available to serve 9,049 children, leaving a slot gap of 5,456. This means 59% of children ages 0-5 in the Region do not have access to child care services. The supply of ECEC in Region 21 falls far from meeting the need.

The slot gaps are not the same in all counties or for all ages. For example, Massac County has the largest overall (0-5 ages) slot gap at 23% and Williamson County has the next highest at 32%.

In terms of age, the greatest slot gap is for children ages 0-3. According to IECAM, there are 4,290 children under the age of three living in the Region, but only 1,104 slots serving only 26% of these children. Only one in four children have access to a program. The slot gap for 0-3 programs and services is the greatest in Johnson County where there are only 38 slots for 293 children (13%).

“ The lack of access to child care, both in terms of availability and affordability, has a large impact on economic development and parental employment in this community. To attract business, we must have adequate, quality care. ”

- Business Leaders (Johnson County)

It is clearly demonstrated by the data that Region 21 is grossly underserved given the number of children living in the Region. In addition community feedback explained that unstable and inadequate funding, inequitable access, space/facility shortages, unaffordable cost of care, and gaps in services and transitions prove to be challenges. Transportation is also a big issue in the Region. Being rural and spread out with programs concentrated around the population centers causes long commutes from home/work, hindering accessibility. There are several half-day programs, which can provide complications for parents/caregivers who need to leave their jobs to drop off or pick up midday morning or afternoon. Also, there are few options for those parents that work non-traditional hours or shift work.

Feedback from the community indicated that possible drivers of this gap include but are not limited to:

- Lack of programs (specifically child care centers and birth to three services)
- Workforce shortages
- Lack of timely payments on behalf of the State
- Lack of staff
- Lack of knowledge about services and how to access them
- Economy earning power and not being able to support private investments
- Not enough facilities
- Loss of slots
- Increase in staff stress levels is due in part to increased behavior/special needs of children and a less than sufficient supply of workforce

This information is pertinent to the Regional Needs Assessment as it is necessary to identify and understand the Region's barriers in order to set realistic goals and identify strategies to ensure children and families have access to the programs and services they need to thrive.

## Early Childhood Education & Care Workforce

ECEC programs are seeing a shortage in the workforce across Region 21. Programs indicate they are facing challenges in both recruiting and retaining a qualified and diverse pool of candidates. They are also seeing a decline in applications for the open positions. There seems to be a lack of students graduating from college with the Early Childhood degree and applying for jobs in ECEC. To assist more individuals in being teacher-qualified, the State recently launched the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship, which helps pay the cost of tuition, books, and fees for those currently working or who have ever worked in ECEC. The “Grow Your Own” Program offers similar support but reaches out to others in the community with the goal of diversifying the Illinois teacher population to reflect the rich racial diversity of its students.

Regional recruitment efforts should address both the supply and diversity needs of the Region. IECAM 2020 data shows that the racial demographic of the workforce actually does mirror that of the children (87% of the children in licensed care in Region 21 are white/Non-Hispanic/Latine) and 90% of the ECEC licensed staff are also white/Caucasian. Concern was expressed that the Region needs more diversity in terms of gender, religion, and culture. Having relationships with a more diverse pool of teachers would help them become more prepared for the world they live in, advancing their learning and understanding of different roles, identities, and worldviews.

Equally important to recruiting new teachers, the field needs to retain those that are already working. When child care providers can hire new staff, they often lose them quickly to other jobs. Provider feedback indicates this is due in large part to finding better pay and benefits elsewhere. According to the Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities: FY 2021, the median annual wage in child care occupations in Region 21 is \$26,018.<sup>9</sup> While individuals serving in administrative capacities in child care centers are most likely to receive wages above the Regions median wage, the majority of child care center teachers and assistant teachers are earning well below the median wage for employed persons in their county. Family child care providers and school-age assistants earn the least.

Along with low wages, teachers report “burnout” as one of the primary reasons they are choosing to change careers, which has heightened because of the pandemic. Ongoing professional development keeps teachers current on best practices and provides practical tools and new ideas to utilize in the classroom, as well as opportunities for support and mentoring. All are important to avoiding burnout and keeping ECEC staff energized.

Early Childhood professionals in the Region report there are a wide variety of professional development opportunities and support. At the local level, the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R) has a robust calendar of professional development offerings for child care staff and other ECEC professionals.



Amy Cocuyo, Kids Corral Director, preparing to share Birth to Five Illinois information with parents from the center

“ I took a huge pay cut when I left my job at Texas Roadhouse for my child care job. I am just now, three years later, making what I made leaving Roadhouse. - Family Council Member (Massac County) ”

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA\\_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-9.pdf](https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-9.pdf)

They have also created an “in-house” Child Development Associate (CDA) program with multiple staff being trained as CDA advisors. This program has seen a high rate of success in helping teacher’s aides working in programs become teacher-qualified, providing them with opportunities for promotion. CCR&R also provides funding for child care professionals to attend conferences and other professional development opportunities offered by groups/agencies in different parts of the State. State and federally funded programs such as pre-K and Head Start also have access to professional development funds in their contract budgets, allowing them to coordinate and access training that is most relevant and designed to meet their staff’s specific needs.

Unfortunately, many ECEC professionals are not able to take full advantage of professional development offerings. Time is the barrier to access mentioned most often. Because of the workforce shortage, it is difficult to take time away from the classroom, as few substitutes are available for classroom coverage, which leaves nights and weekends, creating issues with child care, and challenges in maintaining a work/life balance. Transportation and costs can also be barriers to participation.

Despite resources that exist to support the workforce, the most prevalent reason for the staffing shortage is low wages. While much appreciated, previous State efforts such as the Great Start wage supplement have fallen short of truly addressing the problem. A recently completed pilot of centers in rural areas demonstrated the positive impact of higher wages on both recruitment and retention. The ECEC professionals in Region 21 are extremely excited about the proposed workforce compensation contracts and the potential impact they will have on addressing the shortage. In the meantime, professionals report that other initiatives and policy changes, such as reducing the CCAP copay, are valuable strategies helpful in addressing the field’s workforce recruitment and retention needs.

“As a staff person from a child care center, the \$1 copay (for staff that would qualify for CCAP) has allowed me to reenter the workforce in a profession that I love.”

- ECE Staff (Franklin County)

Early Childhood administrators in the Region noted that they are seeing a large percentage of their educators discouraged by rapidly declining support and regard for the hard work that they do. They are facing more requirements, less time to accomplish them, and experiencing an increase in challenging child behavior issues in their classrooms.

“These children need more and more support and attention. The demand is increasing each year. We are always short-staffed and have so much paperwork and various other responsibilities. The children are not getting our best selves because we are spending so much time focusing on the children with behaviors. The remainder of the children are getting our leftovers because it takes all our time and energy to focus on the behaviors. As staff, it is frustrating to not have the resources to help the children that need your help.”

- ECE Administrator (Williamson County)

The lack of birth-to-three services in the area creates a barrier to addressing these issues. By age three, problems related to children’s unmet needs are more severe, and it is harder to get services for that child. During the COVID-19 lockdown, children’s group care socialization was significantly limited, which is also considered to be a factor.

The Region is rural and widespread and travel expenses are an issue. As of 2020, the average commute to work was 24.2 minutes. Employees must weigh the benefit of working when factoring in the cost of transportation, child care for staff, etc.

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Over the last 10 months, we have had direct interactions with parents/families/caregivers in Region 21. Parents/guardians/families members identified the top things they look for when choosing ECEC for their children.

- Availability of Care
- Cost/Affordability
- Hours of Operation
- Trust
- Quality of Care
- Location in Proximity to Home and Work
- Reputation
- Peer to Peer Referral
- Quality Staff
- Cleanliness of Facility
- Meal Prep



Jordan Kirby and her daughter at the Little Saints Book Club co-sponsored by Birth to Five Illinois: Region 21.

“

I did not have the luxury to choose care based on my priorities. I am a single parent who must go to work. I chose the spot because it was available.

- Single Mom (Massac County)

”

## Families Whose Income Falls Just Above the Thresholds for Financial Assistance

Community feedback indicates that Region 21 has a large population of working families whose incomes fall just over the threshold to receive public assistance. With the state of the current economy and inflation prices, feedback from these families indicate multiple daily struggles which include but are not limited to: families experiencing high levels of stress that impact the children; financial struggles to pay for housing, utilities, food, gas and family essentials; stress leading to health issues and diagnosis including substance abuse disorders for caregivers; and lack of quality/affordable health/dental care for the family.

“

I am a Registered Nurse who recently rejoined the workforce. My husband works full-time out of the home. I was only able to accept this job because my parents are providing care for my boys. If I had to pay private pay rates and commute to work, my expenses to work would be as much as I am making. That is the primary reason I chose to be a stay-at-home mom for those years.

- Parent (Massac County)

”

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA\\_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-9.pdf](https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-9.pdf)

## Children Living in Families with Limited Access to Resources

According to IECAM FY20 data, 47% (4,236) of the children birth to age five in Region 21 are living in households with incomes at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or less. Although the number of children living at 100% FPL (deep poverty) or less has reduced from 2017-2020, there are still 2,323 children living in families without access to resources they need as of 2022, yielding 26% of families living in deep poverty (see Figure 2 for Guidelines). Parental feedback indicated needs for basic resources such as food, medical and dental care, and funds to support the rising cost of rent and utilities. Feedback from Massac County indicates that subsidized housing is costing over \$700 per month for some families. This, coupled with inflation, is making it difficult for families, causing stressful living situations.

“ I drive my daughter 27 miles from home to attend preschool. My office is now right down the road from my house, but I did not want to pull her from where she was in fear that she would not get a spot in our hometown due to the limited availability and long waitlist. It takes me an hour to get to her to school, walk her to her classroom, and then get to work. It puts a strain on us in the mornings to rush around for me to get to work on time.

- Parent (Johnson County)

”

## Rural Landscape

The rural spread-out Regional landscape of Region 21 provides unique challenges for parents/caregivers when accessing care. Most of the care is centered around the 15 population centers (see Figure 1). This results in parents having to commute further to access care or choosing not to access ECEC programs by not entering the workforce. These families must also travel into the city limits to access food, gas, employment and often, internet services.

## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Feedback gathered from grandparents raising grandchildren indicates that financial struggles are a big issue, often causing stress that contributes to health issues. Physical activities with young grandchildren may not be possible or may be challenging.

“ When we did our life plan, we planned for two in our family. That income geared for two people all of a sudden is now five people living on a two-person income.

- Grandparents  
(Massac County)

”

## Foster Care

Since the pandemic hit, foster care case referrals have doubled in Region 21. Some reasons identified by caregivers are that foster parents stopped working and rarely left the house, leading to burnout. In addition, family feedback reports that securing child care for foster children is a real challenge (specifically in Franklin and Williamson Counties). Providers have the right to deny foster children based on the price the State pays for coverage, along with the late payments, which has caused a system disruption, as most foster parents must work to provide for their families.

“

I have been a foster parent since 2017 and have had great difficulty with finding child care for the children in my care. When we initially got licensed to foster, DCFS assure us they would pay for the child care. However, that eventually proved to be false.

In 2019, I had a 4-year-old girl in my care, who is now my adopted daughter. At the time, I was working at a child care center, and they allowed me to enroll her there, since DCFS had verbally committed to pay for her child care bill. To this day, that child care has still not received any payment from DCFS, even though they were billed at the time of service. Another time, in 2020 and 2021, I was caring for 2 young children, and they attended a local child care while I worked. The child care billed DCFS, and to this day they have not received payment for those services. During this period, all child cares in West Frankfort, Illinois stopped accepting foster children.

This history of non-payment does not look good on my or my husband's record! I personally paid over \$2,000 to help pay some of the bill, and DCFS never reimbursed me for doing that. Eventually, in 2021, I had to quit my job because it was either that or lose those foster children who I cared so much about. I quit my job to stay home with them, which was very hard for me to do. I loved that job. Now, we refuse to take in babies or toddlers because I'm in full-time college and my husband works full-time. We wish we could take in more young children, but we do not have the means to do so under these circumstances.

- Family Council Member & Foster Parent (Franklin County)

”

Other parent/caregivers indicated the following challenges in ECEC in Region 21:

- Lack of transportation services
- Lack of care for children with special needs
- Lack of child care slots



## Regional Strengths and Needs

We know the importance of the early years and the promise that high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education gives to all children. Together, we shared strengths, needs and strategies on the ECEC system in Region 21. Collective insights identified the following key themes and lessons:

### Strengths

- The greatest strength in our Region is the people and their relationships with one another. We are committed to building a Regional infrastructure and desire to collaborate and share resources to meet the needs of children and families in early learning.
- The leadership of experienced ECEC Administrators in this Region has helped move programs and initiatives forward, even during the pandemic, which helped mitigate the negative effects of staff turnover and the workforce shortage.
- Although there is not enough care, there are a variety of ECEC options for parents/caregivers to choose from throughout the Region.
- The large number of state funded pre-K and Prevention Initiative programs in the school districts demonstrates the understanding Superintendents have about the importance of Early Childhood services and their role in school readiness.
- Head Start/Early Head Start programs are in the communities with the highest concentration of poverty-level income.
- There is a strong commitment from the Region's higher education institutions to the ECEC workforce, as evidenced by SIU's Grow Your Own Program and their participation in the ECACE Scholarship.
- Publicly funded programs are provided to families at no cost. Children attending these programs can participate in special education services as part of their school day and in the school in which they receive services.
- Professionals are offered a variety of low cost/no cost professional development opportunities.
- ECEC professionals are actively utilizing a variety of technical assistance and professional development opportunities, participating in local, Regional, and statewide offerings, which demonstrates a commitment to high-quality programming.
- The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC) has developed a strong and effective infrastructure that helps connect and coordinate services, maximizing the Region's current resources and promoting better child outcomes and strong family support. This group provides leadership and support to other collective impact initiatives, addressing issues that are best addressed at the local level by helping lay a solid foundation for this work.
- The Johnson County Cabinet for Children and Youth (JCCCY) is a community wide- collective impact emerging Collaboration designed to help children and their families reach their fullest potential.

## Needs

- Funding needs to follow the child so that children can receive the same services and support, no matter the location.
- Families need more information about CCAP, including family and provider eligibility.
- Parent/caregivers need more information on the available resources in Region 21.
- To make informed decisions, the Region's leaders need accessibility to a centralized source for data.
- A universal collection of key data elements, such as housing insecurity, is needed.
- Early Childhood educators in the Region need competitive, livable wages along with benefits (health, retirement, paid time off, holiday pay).
- Innovative new approaches to funding have the potential to support adequate compensation for the entire field, not just some sectors.
- Working families need more access to full day state funded programs.
- There is an overarching need for transportation, including both personal transportation and transportation to and from ECEC programs and support services.
- More support and/or resources for all ECEC programs to address Early Childhood mental health and behavior issues.
- Because of the economy of this Region, to stay in business it is a necessity that most programs accept CCAP. Per policy, the provider may not charge the State more than its private pay parents. As CCAP rates are raised, providers must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that are more affordable. We need a policy that does not cause a disruption of care, both for the child and their family.

# Recommendations

Through the process of gathering family opinions and engaging local stakeholders, we have identified recommendations to address the Early Childhood needs within Region 21. These recommendations are based on input we received from families, community members, and business stakeholders who are living in and using the ECEC system in our Region.

## Overarching Recommendations

- If we want to create an equitable system based on data, the State should prioritize its data collecting efforts, including what data elements are collected across programs, and creating a centralized and accessible repository for all data collected.
- We recommend locally that we host town halls to share and educate community members on local needs and to expand this knowledge and these conversations to partner organizations outside of ECEC.

## Access

- Birth to Three services need to be expanded in the entire Region. No county in the Region meets service needs for more than 29% of its children. The county with the least number of services is Johnson.
- The expansion of pre-K services should include not only more slots, but also expand some part day programs to full day programs to meet the needs of families.
- Transportation is a continuous need. Continue to elevate transportation and explore different ways of access for families. We encourage the State to explore alternative delivery models to get services to families to meet these needs.
- Special services and supports for diagnosed and suspected disabilities/conditions should be provided in all early childhood settings.

## Affordability

- Increase the utilization of CCAP. Locally, we will expand on our CCR&R's current efforts to promote CCAP by partnering to distribute promotional materials; share information; and educate families, community stakeholders, and employers about the program, its eligibility criteria, and the changing policies that make the program more accessible to families.
- We encourage IDHS to continue to decouple private pay rates with CCAP rates.
- Child care assistance for children in foster care should be funded by IDHS and included in the regular CCAP program in an effort to streamline funding.

## Quality

- As a Region, we recommend the State continues to increase its resources aimed at recruiting and retaining an adequate workforce.
- We recommend locally that we work to increase quality by promoting and sharing information about the State's current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers, and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.

- We recommend continued funding and technical assistance support for local and Regional Collaborations (SICCF, JCCCY) so they can progress their transformative work, leading cross-sector initiatives that maximize resources, reduce duplication of services, and enhance child and family outcomes.
- In state contracts (Quality Contracts, pre-K, etc.), we encourage the State to explore funding mechanisms/ levels that allow programs to have smaller student/teacher ratios to provide better learning experiences for children and experience stronger relationships with caregivers. During the pandemic, program administrators reported smaller ratios and better behaviors.
- All programs should receive equitable funding, resources, and support to serve the special needs of children.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 21, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: References

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## Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: Most Populated Towns in each County in Region 21

County	City	Population
Franklin	West Frankfort	7,597
Johnson	Vienna	1,343
Massac	Metropolis	5,969
Williamson	Marion	16,855

Source: U.S. Census  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Regional Demographics for Region 21

	Number of Children Ages Birth to Five	Number of Children Ages Birth to Two	Number of Children Ages Three to Five	Number of Children at or below 200% FPL
Franklin	2,630	1,304	1,326	1,357 (52%)
Johnson	732	318	414	364 (50%)
Massac	952	463	489	420 (44%)
Williamson	4,630	2,194	2,436	2,211 (48%)
Total	8,982	4,290	4,692	4,362 (48%)
Illinois	1,230:1	1,210:1	340:1	
United States	1,310:1	1,380:1	340:1	

Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Throughout the development of the Regional Needs Assessment, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others. In the interest of time and space, only select questions are included.

### Parents/Families/Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the childcare services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
6. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
7. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parent/caregivers, specifically?

### Utilization of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

1. What has been your experience with the CCAP (barriers and strengths)?
2. How did you find out about the CCAP Program?
3. Do you feel that CCAP has met your needs? Why or why not?
4. How was the CCAP application process for you?
5. What was the number one thing that you looked for in a program when choosing childcare?
6. If you could change one thing about the CCAP and enrollment process, what would it be?
7. How do you stay connected with the CCAP program? For example, if there are changes made to the program, how do you become aware of them?

### ECE Administrators

1. What challenges do you see families having regarding accessing Early Childhood Education and Care?
2. Do you provide birth to five services in the region? If so, what? And how do families know about these services?
3. What do you think is the biggest impact of the lack of birth to three programs and services in the county? To the child? To the school? To the community?
4. What does recruitment/retainment look like regarding ECEC workforce? What are the reasons people are leaving?

## Business Leaders

1. What are the attractors that you are selling for businesses to come to our community?  
As business are opening in this community, what are the supports they are seeking to be successful?
2. Is childcare readily available and close to employers in your community?
3. Tell me about barriers for staff that affect their attendance.
4. As a business owner, are you offering any incentives to retain or attract employees?
5. What accommodations have you had to make to accommodate professionals with young children?
6. What reasons are they giving for resigning?
7. What are challenges in economic development regarding childcare?
8. What trends have you seen in employment over the last 2-3 years (hiring, recruitment, challenges)?
9. What changes in our community would businesses thrive and build longevity?

## Collaborative Partners

1. What challenges do you see families having regarding accessing early childhood education care?
2. Do you provide services Birth to Five in the Region? If so, what? And how do families know about these services?
3. What does recruitment/retainment look like regarding ECEC workforce? What are the reasons people are leaving?
4. What do you think is the biggest impact of the lack of birth to three programs and services in the county? To the child? To the school system? To the community?
5. What is most important to a parent/family when choosing an Early Childhood program?

## Family Child Care

1. What reasons can contribute to the number of FCC slots in the Region decreasing?
2. Why are younger people not stepping into the FCC field?
3. Are the locations close to employers?
4. What does the Early Childhood Education and Care services landscape look like in your region?
5. What impact did COVID have on Early Childhood Education and Care providers in the region?
6. A slot gap is when there are more children eligible for enrollment in Early Childhood Education and care than actual enrollment slots available. What other indicators should be considered alongside the slot gap data?
7. What barriers do you notice families experiencing in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care?
8. Tell me about the workforce in your Region? Are there initiatives that exist to support/recruit providers?
9. How diverse is the ECEC workforce and is the workforce representative of the communities they serve?
10. Tell me about the placement, process, and awarding of ECEC grants.
11. What is the capacity that you can serve in your program? Special Needs? Dual language? Homeless?
12. What support does your program have in place to support families? (Extended care, transportation, health, family engagement)



## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

1. What is your experience with the ECE system?
2. Can you share your experience with the enrollment process?
3. What barriers have you encountered raising your grandchildren?
4. What successes have you had in raising your grandchildren?
5. What services do not exist in your community that you feel would be helpful?
6. What was your experience like in accessing therapy services?
7. What/who have been your biggest support?

## Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. In your profession what do you see as the biggest challenge for families?
2. What supports does your program have in place to address those challenges?
3. What do you feel is the biggest impact from the lack of birth to three services? To the child? To the school system? To the community?
4. How do people know about your program?
5. What changes have you seen in the community over the past few years (not just in ECEC)?
6. How might those changes impact the need for ECE?
7. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
8. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
9. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
10. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
11. Is childcare readily available and close to employers in your community?
12. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How has this accommodation impacted your business or company?
13. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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Birth to Five Illinois is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and is a department of the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA).